Central Oman March 1997. 20

The survey effectively started on 14 March south-east of Dank us across a tongue of the huge Umm as Samin subkha (WA20) that straddles the border with Saudi Arabia. After Sayh Rawl we the survey was off the road we hired a four wheel drive vehicle in Saudi Arabia and Yemen with one or two in central Oman. The survey took place hetween 13-29 March inclusive, I was fields of Yibal and Fahud to Sayh Rawl (WB 19). Our route took and Oman Bird Record Committee databases. Unatlassed squares (WB24). From there we travelled southwards along the edge of the Ruh al Khali (VB24 - VB21), which in this area is mainly isolated sand dune ridges with gravel plains in between, through the oil gardens and wadis around Dank and Ibri (WA23) were the last headed east to join the north-south highway at Ghaha (XA 19). The

Summary Report of ABBA Survey No 21 to Central Oman March 1997

This ABBA Survey was to obtain records from a number of Oman squares for which there were none or very few on both the ABBA and Oman Bird Record Committee databases. Unatlassed squares were mainly clustered along the border of Oman with the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Yemen with one or two in central Oman. The survey took place between 13-29 March inclusive, I was accompanied throughout by my partner Carol Qirreh. As most of

Fig 8. ABBA Survey No 21 to Central Oman March 1997.

Turdoides squamiceps, graceful warbler Prinia gracilis, little green bee-eater Merops orientalis and purple sunbird nectarinia asiatica were not seen again until returning north. On the edge of the Rub al Khali typical birds were great grey shrike Lanius excubitor (feeding young in the nest), brown necked raven Corvus ruficollis (also attending nests) and hoopoe lark Alaudaen alaudipes. In settlements and small irrigated patches house sparrow Passer domesticus (which occurs no further south than VB22), Eurasian collared dove Streptopelia decaocto, palm dove S. senegalensis and crested lark Galerida cristata were to be found. Desert wheatears Oenanthe deserti, a common winter visitor, were occasionally singing. Oman is noted for it quantity and variety of sandgrouse and on this leg we had chestnut-bellied Pterocles exustus, spotted P. senegallus and crowned P. coronatus. A cream coloured courser Cursorius cursor was seen in display flight in WB19.

From Ghaba our route was planned to take us further east through two unatlassed squares XB20 and XB19 and then on to the Arabian Sea at Ghubbat Hashish (YA18). Unfortunately in square XB20 a major mishap occurred when we received two punctures simultaneously and only had one spare tyre on the vehicle. This forced a return to the highway some 40 km away. Driving on one flat tyre it disintegrated and long before we got back to the road we were down to the metal wheel rim. Reaching the road was not the end of our problems as we then had to hitchhike 100 kms north to Adam (XB21) to find a tyre to enable us to get the vehicle mobile again. This event lost us two days. Before we got the punctures we had found black-crowned finch lark Eremopterix nigriiceps very common in the shallow wadis east of the highway where the heavy spring rains had produced many grasses and ephemeral plants. One curious observation was of a female seen to collect grasses and add it to a nest that already held three eggs. A second courser was displaying in XB20. Desert lark Ammonomanes deserti occur sparingly in the region on the gravel plains, these had fledged young. A single bar-tailed desert lark A. cincturus was seen in XB20, it may have been wandering. A few Egyptian vultures

Society News:

Saudi Arabian Natural History Society: New address MBE 138, P O Box 14021, Jeddah 21424, Saudi Arabia.

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Neophron percnopterus were near Ghaba and Adam and in the north but they were not seen again in the drier southern deserts. Up until this time we had experienced some pretty unpleasant weather with high winds and dust most days and nights. We found out later that there had been some exceptionally heavy rain storms in the north and it appears that our own bad weather was on the periphery of this system. In an effort to find calmer conditions we decided that instead of heading east again we would drive south along the highway. On the afternoon of 17 March we drove south to Qitbit (UB15) where we took accommodation for the night at the guesthouse. The Qitbit guesthouse gardens are the only green patch in a wide area of south central Oman but surprisingly they were almost devoid of migrants. The only visiting species found in a half hour census at dawn were a few desert lesser whitethroats Sylvia minula, a chiffchaff Phylloscopus collybita and a swallow Hirundo rustica, which was singing. Only three other swallows were seen throughout the survey which indicates just how very few migrants were in the desert at that time. Since my last visit to Qitbit in November 1995 the Eurasian collared dove had colonised these gardens.

From Qitbit we went north and east to Marsawdaw (UAI5) and then on to Shiqaq (UA16). These are both military camps, the former has a few animal enclosures (rock thrust Monticola saxatilis seen there) and the latter has an overflowing artesian well (sulphurous) that was good for a few migrants, including pallid harrier Circus macrourus and water pipit Anthus spinolletta. The final settlement of Mashash (UA16) is right on the Saudi Arabian border surrounded by high dunes. There were a group of 43 brown-necked ravens hanging round the village indicating that for many of the species the breeding season had already finished. Palm dove were the only commensal species in the village. Nearby two presumed nest sites of little owl Athene noctua were located, one pair owned a heap of rubble and another a much holed old Ghaf tree Prosopis cineria.

After this we visited the areas to the west of the highway, that is Shisur (TB13) and Fasad (TA13). Just south of Qitbit there are pivot irrigation schemes in squares UA15 and UA14 (Dauka). In the former there was a single white stork Ciconia ciconia. It was there 19 and 20 March. Fasad has a number of camel troughs which were excellent spots for sandgrouse observation. The three species already mentioned all coming in to drink. Often in pairs but none were seen to do the characteristic rocking movements to wet their breast feathers and take water back to young. Occasionally the odd chestnut-bellied would come in to drink with palm doves have got to Shisur but they are not yet at Fasad, although the latter had rock doves Columba livia. Visitors at Fasad were a forlorn black headed gull Larus ridibundus and a white wagtail Motacilla alba. Unfortunately the dusty atmosphere and wind was still making birding and camping very unpleasant and rather than go on to the Yemen border we reluctantly returned to Qitbit. In any event just west of Fasad we were in the square adjacent to the easternmost square I had reached in Yemen in the previous month (ABBA survey 21). On the way back to Qitbit we had a pair of Dunn's lark Eremalantha dunnii in SB14 the only ones seen.

On leaving Qitbit the second time we travelled across the hard gravel deserts southeast, towards the oil fields of Marmul (VA13) and from there via Shelim (VB13) to the Arabian sea at Ras Suqrah (WB13). On this leg two squares held bar-tailed desert larks. We camped near Shelim and during the night there we heard Lichtenstein's sandgrouse Pterocles lichtensteinii, little owl and spotted thick-knee Burhinus capensis calling. Shelim was also the only place we recorded sand partridge Ammoperdix heyi. We did not enter the afrotropical zone of Dhofar at all and the only species recorded with south-west Arabian affinities was the South Arabian mourning wheatear Oenanthe ingentoides at the edge of its range near Suqrah.

From Ras Suqrah our route took us northwards along the coast to Madraka, (XB15) Duqm (XB16) and Ghubbat Hashish. The coast in this region is backed by low limestone hills which occasionally reached the coast as cliffs. In between there are low lying areas, in places forming subkha. Extensive subkhas occur near and north of Duqm. Unfortunately the weather deteriorated as we progressed northwards, becoming overcast with frequent showers. It was also surprisingly cold for the time of year. The coastal region produced a wide variety of gulls, terns and waders. These included masked booby Sula dactylatra, great white egret Egretta alba and osprey Pandion haliaetus. A party of 30 crab plover Dromas ardeola were resting on the tide line at Khor Gawri (WB14). At Khor Dhiris (XA16) there were a flock of 200 Saunders' tern Sterna sandvicensis, a group of coot Fulica atra, five avocet Recurvirostra avosetta and a spotted eagle Aquila clanga which had presumably wintered there. There are rocky cliffs at Ras Madraka but the fishing village nearby had some muddy tidal spots which held a flock of 22 Pacific golden plover Pluvialis fulva and three oystercatchers Haematopus ostralegus. Duqm is a fishing centre and the activities of fishermen had attracted large numbers of gulls, some 10,000 sooty gulls Larus hemprichii and 5,000 herring/lesser black-backed gulls L. argentatusfuscus were present. A flock of 600 Socotra cormorants Phalacrocorax nigrolagus were feeding communally in the Ras Duqm area.

North of Duqm there were met pools of water on the subkha which gradually became more extensive the further north we went. In square YA18 the landscape took on the appearance of a large lake with only the slightly raised edges to the graded track protruding through the water as a guide for driving. On 25 March in YA18 and YA19 we drove north through some 80 kms of such inundated areas, until we reached the Wadi Andam which was in flood and totally impassable. The waters of this wadi were some 250 m across and approximately a metre and a half deep and flowing as fast as one could run. The Wadi Andam drains a large part of the Eastern Hajar mountains far to the north. The parallel Wadi Halfayan, only about 5 kms to the west, drains a large part of the Jebel Akhdar. The Wadi Halfayan was also in flood and, if anything deeper, wider and faster than the Wadi Andam. When in flood these two wadis intermingle and it was also clear that the flood waters were emptying in the already inundated subkhas behind us. We were on a parcel of land slightly above the level of the two wadis and were marooned. We could not go back, sideways or forwards and had to remain there for four more days until the Wadi Andam was low enough to attempt a crossing. Our island was populated by a number of other stranded travellers including four fish lorries on the way from Masirah to Dubai. Luckily there was also a petrol station and a small shop at the settlement, known locally as Safaj, which was able to sustain us. We were able to ford the Wadi Andam on the fifth day, 29 March. Unfortunately when crossing the vehicle was immersed in a well of deep water which required a earthmoving tractor to pull us out and resulted in the loss and damage of quite a bit of equipment. To our surprise the vehicle started again and we were able to get to Muscat in time to catch our booked flight out that night. We never did get to XB19.
The Safaj area was well wooded with Ghaf trees. Birds in the area included yellow throated sparrow *Petronia xanthocollis* (quite common) pallid swift *Apus pallida*, desert lark, chestnut-bellied and Lichtenstein's sandgrouse, Eurasian collared dove (common), little green bee-eater and crested lark.

The vegetation on central Oman was surprisingly different to that noted in eastern Yemen in the previous month (ABBA Survey 20). The Ghaf is a common tree in northern Oman and occurs in quite thick forests as far south as near Marsawad and isolated trees are found to just north of Shisur. However the Ghaf tree is not found at all in Yemen. On the other hand *Moringa* and *Leptadenia* are common in Yemen but the former was not seen in Oman and the latter was relatively scarce. In both countries *Acacia sp.* are widespread. Large *Maerua crassifolia* trees were common in Yemen but in Oman only rare, stunted specimens were found. There was much ephemeral vegetation in Oman on account of recent local rains giving a very green landscape in places - especially between Haima and Qibit. Eastern Yemen had experienced a drought the previous winter and possibly for several years and was devoid of small green plants.

Not much other wildlife was seen. We saw a hare *Lepus capensis* in UA16, a red fox *Vulpes vulpes* in VB13, a gazelle *Gazella sp.* inXA14 and two hedgehog *Paraechinus sp.* remains on the road at TB13. Worrar lizards *Varanus griseus* are widespread. Large *Maerua crassifolia* trees were common in Yemen but in Oman only rare, stunted specimens were found. There was much ephemeral vegetation in Oman on account of recent local rains giving a very green landscape in places - especially between Haima and Qibit. Eastern Yemen had experienced a drought the previous winter and possibly for several years and was devoid of small green plants.

In view of the bad weather, lost time through mishaps and the failure to get to some of the places that had been intended, the results of this survey were somewhat disappointing. Never-the-less the survey covered a total of 45 atlas squares of which three had no previous ABBA records recorded for them and a further 12 squares had three or less species recorded in them.

Carol and I would like to thank Jens and Hanne Eriksen for their very kind hospitality on the day we arrived in Oman and also the day we departed and for providing us with numerous items of equipment to assist our camping, advice on places that might possibly be visited and much other help. We also wish to thank the benefactor (who wishes to remain anonymous) who kindly sponsored the cost of the hire of a four wheel drive vehicle, without which it would not have been possible to have visited any of the new squares we were able to get to.

*Michael C Jennings.*

**Bald Ibis Again**

The search for the illusive bald ibis in Yemen continues with the Yemen Ornithology Society offering a reward of 10,000 Yemeni rials to anyone who can provide evidence of it in that country. The project produced quite a number of responses including one (discounted)record of bald ibis being seen on a bird table! More interestingly a Somali expatriate in Yemen provided details of possible nesting in northern Somalia. News has also been received from Chris Bowden who is coordinating the RSPB's Bald Ibis Research Project. He has turned up a record from Mike Hands who was in Yemen in the 1970's, who found five ibises at rock ledge nests to the north-west of Yarim (KA05), Yemen. On the face of it this seems very good evidence of breeding - further details are eagerly awaited.

Nejat Özkân the Deputy General Director of the Turkish Department of Game and Wildlife has advised of a Turkish initiative to ring bald ibis at the Birecik colony in south-east Turkey.

The wild population at Birecik became extinct in 1990. However there are around 70 birds still at Birecik. Every year in February caged birds are released into the wild and they breed at the traditional site. Additional food is however provided. The traditional migration southwards commences after July. During August the released birds are taken back into captivity because they do not migrate. If this were not done many would die. However some 10-15 birds are disappearing each year from Birecik. They are thought to migrate south but no data is available on where they go to. In recent years wintering bald ibis have been recorded in Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

During 1997 the Game and Wildlife Department in Turkey will start a ringing project of all the bald ibis at Birecik. Although we would all like to think the bald ibises in Yemen and Saudi Arabia are from an as yet undiscovered colony, hopefully in Arabia, it seems the birds seen in recent years have probably come from Turkey. Those lucky enough to see a bald ibis should keep a special look out for rings in future. If ringed birds are seen then information on date, co-ordinates, activity of the bird seen and the number of birds, are important for the project. The project organisers also regard it as important to establish information about the ringing of the bald ibis in other Middle Eastern countries. As far as the Turkish project organisers are aware there are no ringing records for the species, so if anyone knows different they should advise Nejat.

*Details to be sent to Nejat Özkân, Deputy General Director, Department of Game and Wildlife, Ministry of Forestry, Orman Bakanlıları, Gazi Tesisleri 11 No'lu Bina Kat: 3 06560, Gazi/Ankara, Turkey. Tel: (90) 312 221 17 69 Fax (90) 312 222 51 40.*

Fig 9. There has long been a small local resident population of moustached warbler *Acrocephalus melanopogon* near Hufod (PB28) in the Eastern Province. In recent years they have started to breed elsewhere. A pair were feeding two juveniles in phragmites June 1996 at the al Hair water course, south of Riyadh (MB25), (D James). Also seen most days May and June 1997 near Jubail (PB31) including at least four juveniles (B S Meadows).